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Once banned Muslim scholar makes US appearance

by Omar Sacirbey by Religion News Service

Tariq Ramadan made his first public appearance in the U.S. April 8 since the U.S. State Department barred entry to the controversial scholar and Islamic activist in 2004.

Ramadan's appearance on a panel in New York on "Islam in the West" reflects recent U.S. efforts to build bridges with Muslims and ends a long odyssey for Ramadan, who teaches Islamic Studies at the University of Oxford.

Ramadan, on a five-day visit, is the grandson of Hasan Al-Banna, who founded the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

But the Swiss-born Ramadan is popular among Muslims who appreciate his message about the compatibility of Islam and democracy. He has also criticized American policies in Iraq and Palestine, however, garnering enemies who say his moderate talk is a smokescreen for radical ambitions.

In 2004 the Bush administration revoked Ramadan's visa and later accused him of sending money to a charity connected to terrorists. Ramadan said the group was not on a U.S. government watch-list when he made the donation, and had no way of knowing their terrorism connection.

On Thursday, Ramadan said the ban undermined American values and that it was no longer appropriate to speak about "Muslims in the West," but rather "Western Muslims."

"The difference is that we are not here in a host country. We are at home, and Islam is a Western religion," Ramadan said.

Talk of Muslim integration was old, too, he said. "It's time not to speak about integrating, it's to think about contribution, what do you give to your country. This is a step forward, when you give something,

people are not asking where do you come from, they want to know where we are going together.?

Ramadan was speak April 10 in Chicago at a banquet sponsored by the Council on American Islamic Relations, and April 12 at Georgetown University.

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